

**Hangama Amiri**

*Free Women Writers*

*Art Can Let Afghan Women Express Our Unique Selves, August, 2017*



## Art Can Let Afghan Women Express Our Unique Selves

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Hangama Amiri is an up-and-coming Afghan-Canadian artist. She graduated from NSCAD University in Halifax, Nova Scotia and was a Canadian Fulbright Fellow at Yale University. Currently, Amiri is an Artist-in-Residence at Lunenburg School of the Arts in Nova Scotia. Hangama has had exhibitions in London, Venice, New York, California, Morocco, Hong Kong, Vancouver, Toronto and Halifax. She paints with purpose highlighting issues such as cross-cultural dialogue, women's rights, and feminism. We had the pleasure to interview her:

**Pary:** Hangama jan, please tell us about yourself. What originally inspired you to become an artist and painter?

**Hangama:** I enjoyed painting my memories from a young age. Although I left Afghanistan when I was a child, I have forever felt nostalgic for the land, my classmates, and the playgrounds in which we played after school. I turned my memories into art. I remember as an Afghan refugee in Tajikistan, one of my first painting was "Twin Buddhas". It was about the reconstruction of the two largest Buddhas in Bamiyan, which were destroyed by the Taliban. I submitted the piece to a UNHCR Art Competition and it won first prize in the competition and scholarship entry to Olimov College of Fine Arts. After I graduated from the program, we immigrated to Canada in 2005 where I graduated from university.



*"Women Gathering" by Hangama Amiri*

**Pary:** What techniques do you use to incorporate feminism and women's rights into your art?

**Hangama:** I use materials such as Dari text, to add Afghan elements in my paintings. I also use symbolic objects that are attached to certain nostalgia in my memories. I have often mixed my oil color with Afghan soil to add another layer of feeling and texture onto the surface of my canvases. From this exploration of cultural materials, I expand the notion of what contemporary Afghan feminism is and how my feminist work can relate to those objects of desire.

**Pary:** I noticed the usage of 'Afghan Feminism' in descriptions of your work. Would you elaborate on the differences and perhaps artistic details between Afghan Feminism and the feminism of the West, per say? Why do you think it matters to have a movement for women's rights that is Afghan-led?

**Hangama:** The emancipation of women in Muslim-majority societies is one of the most important political issues in present day. I feel that in Afghanistan especially we face so many unique forms of oppression that it is important for us to find unique and creative solutions to them. For me the main question is: How can Afghan women look forward when their lives have been immobilized for years and they have been scarred with immense psychological trauma? Our feminism should include work on our rights, but also on our health, financial independence, on the impact of war in our lives, and many other factors that are harming us disproportionately. This is why I think it should be up to Afghan women to express what "feminism" as a term means to us, in our context.



This cannot be done by imposing Western definitions of feminism that can be exclusionary in their own right and have come out of different contexts and forms of oppressions. Rather, it can be better accomplished by looking deeply from inside at the country's roots, history and traditions and how they've impacted women.



*Hangama paints a piece for her upcoming show at the Lunenburg School of the Arts titled "We Rise Again: Portraits of Afghan Women"- Photo Credit: Corey Isenor*

**Pary:** Having lived & traveled in various countries – do you pull inspiration from everywhere? And as far as identity, has the hyphenated identity (Afghan-Canadian) been a central theme in your work or any specific artwork?

**Hangama:** This exploration has led me to think deeply the notions of home, place and identity. So much of my work touches on this human attachment to a particular place that reflects understanding of peoples, languages, local experiences, and cultural practices as forms of communication.

As an Afghan-Canadian artist, I have also done community-based research art work in Nova Scotia, including Halifax, Lunenburg, Prince Edward Island, Mahonebay, Wolfville, and soon I'm doing an artist residency program Banff Centre for the arts in Alberta. Especially my bodies of work such as, *At the Edge of the Shore* (2012-2013), *Topophilia* (2013 – 2014), and *Cliff of the Bay* (2015). Throughout these extensive four years, I have wandered in the landscapes and explored the notions of nostalgia for home and for oneself.

**Pary:** Who within the community of flourishing Afghan artists inspires you?

**Hangama:** I really admire one of our Afghan performance artists, [Lida Abdul](#). Her videos and installations strongly explore themes of cultural identity, diaspora, and migration based on her own nomadic life experiences.

**Pary:** Would you like to highlight any pieces of art that are close to your heart?

**Hangama:** In 2012, when I was in Afghanistan, the Taliban shot dead a woman accused of adultery in public near Kabul. It was shocking news for everyone in the city because it was assumed that stoning happened only in the lawless rural villages under the Taliban control. Through this piece, I wanted to highlight the fact that at the heart of the Taliban's goal is to take away every right from every woman.



*"The Raining Stones", 2011, Acrylic, oil and earth on canvas*

My painting series "Memory Diary" consists of '50' small paintings on wood panel, which explore my childhood and my memories from Afghanistan.

This summer, I'm in the process of completing a painting project based on my research on "War, Women, and Afghan Heroines", which consists of six large-scale oil paintings on linen and explores individual legendary Afghan women who have been change-makers, both from pre-and post-Taliban rule.

**Pary:** What would you say to a young girl in Afghanistan who aspires to grow up and become a successful artist like yourself?

**Hangama:** I recommend that you treat every day as an important milestone. Keep painting your dreams, imaginations, memories, and explore the relationship between the medium and the surface. For me, art making (in its countless forms) allows us the freedom to express our humanity and unique selves.